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SIZE UP FROM THE BACK SEAT

Size up, the mental and verbal process where the first due company describes the scene and what will be needed, should occur on every call. Period. Not just legitimate structure fires. Not just large scale wild land fires. Not just high rise fires. All calls, medical aids included, can benefit you from a good size up. The officer, but not only the officer, should be doing the size up. He should be painting a picture for the incoming companies of what he sees, what he's going to do and what he is going to need. The firefighter should also be doing a size up. Although the firefighter's size up is not broadcasted to the other companies, it is still vital to a smooth and efficient firefight. The intent of this article is to cover the size up from the firefighter standpoint. This article will also cover some tricks that we have used in reading buildings which in turn will help with the "what you have" aspect of size up.

So what goes into a firefighter's size up? Although the officer's size up is crucial to a well-run fire scene, a good firefighter size up can result in the work being done efficiently and timely. Just because you ride in the jump seat does not mean that you don't have to do size up. Yes, it is the officer's responsibility to relay all of the pertinent information about the fire scene but it's equally important that you, the firefighter, start assessing information on your own. (And be ready to relay that information to your captain) This responsibility begins at the start of every shift. Getting the "low down" from the previous shift on what they did and what they may have used is a good place to start. Check your engine out thoroughly and know your riding assignment. Know where everything is. Don't assume that everything is where you left it. Check your nozzles. I repeat, **check your nozzles**. Right to fight is where your combination nozzles should be set. Ask your captain what your duties are at a fire. You cannot effectively fight a fire if you are unfamiliar with your engine and you unfamiliar with your duties at the fire scene. If you don't have riding assignments then at least work it out with your partner so that you are not fighting over the nozzle while other tasks go undone.

Now you get dispatched to a fire. The size up process shifts into high gear. You should be aware of all the information on the dispatch. Take a second and listen. Get apartment number, tactical channel, people trapped, and fire type (bells and smells vs. visible smoke and flame), etc. from that dispatch. Are you familiar with the part of town you are going to? Do you have any previous knowledge of the address or at least the neighborhood you are going to? (This knowledge possibly coming from having been there on a medical aid)

Are you going into a neighborhood made up of predominately single story dwellings, multiple story Victorians, apartment complexes or are you headed into a commercial zone. What type of construction are you likely to encounter? Start thinking of what type of fire you are likely to face. This will help in that you will be ready when your officer gives his directions on how he wants to fight this fire. You'll be able to predict what your captain is going to ask for. You should be ready to move as soon as the engineer sets the brake.

Another point should you be thinking about enroute, as you don all of your protective clothing, is whether you are going to be first due or second due. If you are first due then you will be stretching the initial attack line, doing some "light" forcible entry, performing a search and/or securing a water source. If you are second due then your duties change to assisting with the stretching of the initial attack line, stretching a back-up line, checking the attic for extension and securing a water source for the first due engine. Your riding assignment will dictate your duties and tools. Arrival at the scene should not be the first time you think of what you need to do. Be aware, for instance, that if you are second due and your riding assignment is the "irons" or "back-up" man that you may need to leave your irons on the rig in exchange for an attic ladder and a hook. Hopefully your captain will also realize this and grab the irons if needed.

Now you are on scene and you are ready to jump into action. Remember that you are your captain's extra set of eyes. As you do your size up of the scene don't be hesitant to relay pertinent information that your captain may not see. Power lines down, multiple mailboxes, and information given to you from occupants/neighbors are some important observations that you can relay to your captain. But don't bog your captain down with less than critical info. There will be time later to critique what you see other crews doing. Stay focused on what **you** need to do.

Your size up should also include a survey of the fire building. What kind of occupancy is it? How many stories? How many entrances and exits? Where are the stairwells? Where are the bedrooms? A lot of these questions can be answered as you walk up to the building. The occupancy and stories is usually obvious. But be on the lookout for what appears to be single story from the front but a side view reveals a converted attic with a window. Stairway knowledge is key to getting victims out quickly. Stairways are usually near the front door in residential buildings. Stairwells in commercial buildings with residential on the upper floors are harder to detect. One indication might be a window over the door. A window, over the outside entrance, sometimes lights the interior stairwells. If from the street you see multiple doors and one has a window over it, that door usually leads to the stairs. This is valuable information to consider when stretching lines.

Another factor of size up that can greatly increase your chances of locating a victim is knowing where the bedrooms are, or at least having an educated guess of where they might be. There will be a greater chance of finding someone in a bedroom. It is our job to reach these bedrooms as quickly as possible. The aggressive search technique, without the benefit of a hose line, puts firefighters at the greatest risk, but gives trapped civilians the best chance of survival. Therefore it is our job, being on the engine, to know where these bedrooms are so that we can protect the civilians as well as our truck brothers doing a search. Here are a few tricks that we have learned that give you a better than average chance of determining where the bedrooms are from the outside.

There are many other tips that can help you in doing your job more efficiently. These are just a few that we have determined to be pretty reliable when it comes to finding the bedrooms.

It is true that it is the officer who runs the fire. He is in charge of the scene and is responsible for directing the operations. But the firefighter is who puts this plan into action. Being aware of what his crew might encounter and being prepared for anything is not only the officer's responsibility but the firefighters as well. Firefighters must begin their preparation to fight fire, their "size up", the minute they walk in the firehouse door and continue it until they go home the next morning. By doing this you will be giving the citizens you are sworn to protect every chance of surviving, should a fire occur. Do your job and do it right. They deserve it.

Residential, one and two story, dwellings:

1. Standing in the front yard and looking at the front of the house, what do you see?
Do you have any indicators of where the bedrooms are, such as bedroom curtains in the window?
2. Is the front door facing the street? If the front door is facing the street and there are windows on either side, more often than not the window on the hinge side of the front door is a bedroom. The reasoning behind this is that the door will usually open 90 degrees and stop at a wall. On the other side of the wall is usually a bedroom. (**Figures 1 and 2**)

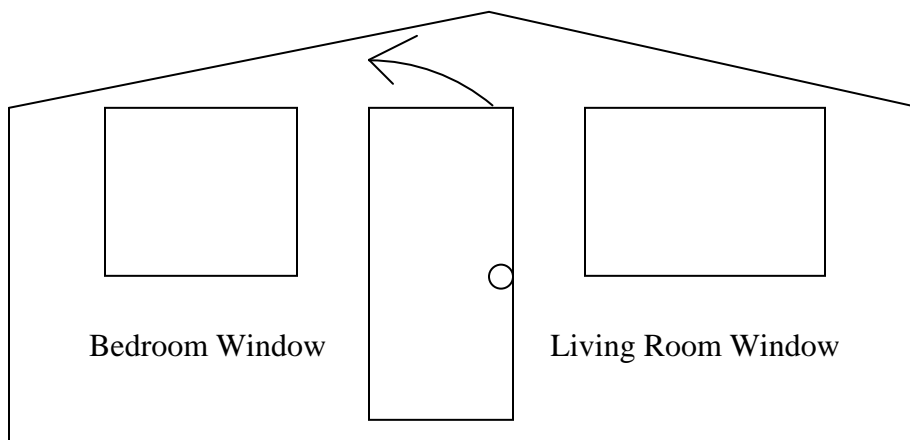


Figure 1

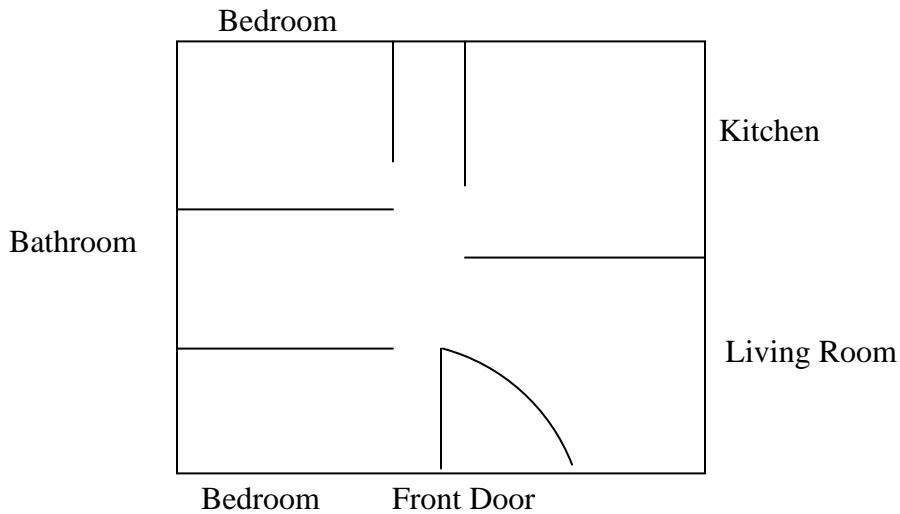


Figure 2

3. Be aware of similar building types. Neighborhoods will usually have similar floor plans. So if you are dispatched to a house fire and you were in the neighbors house on a medical aid, odds are the floor plans will be similar.

Apartment Complexes

Pay attention to window mounted air conditioning units. They will usually be mounted in the same place for all of the units. So, if on a medical aid call you notice that the bedroom has a window air conditioner they probably all will. With that information, you will be able to tell from the outside which windows are bedrooms and which windows are living rooms.